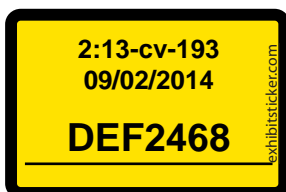


Racial Differences in Self-Reported and Validated Turnout in the 1988 Presidential Election



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Our previous analyses of the 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, and 1986 vote validation studies questioned the conclusion that low levels of electoral participation by blacks result solely from racial differences in socioeconomic status and because blacks are more likely than whites to live in the South. The 1988 NES vote validation study is used to update our findings, and the results are consistent with our previous analyses. Although controls for region and level of education eliminate racial differences in reported electoral participation, significant racial differences remain when participation is measured by the vote validation procedures. In addition, the 1988 NES survey suggests that racial differences in both reported and validated turnout increased in 1988, and we speculate on the reasons that black turnout declined in the 1988 presidential election.

During the two decades between the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 1986 midterm election, racial differences in turnout gradually were reduced. According to the Current Population Surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, whites were 12.2 percentage points more likely to report voting than nonwhites in the 1964 election, but by 1984 they were only 5.6% more likely to report voting than blacks.¹ Racial differences in midterm elections also declined. In 1966, whites were 15.3 percentage points more likely to report voting than blacks, but by 1986 racial differences fell to only 3.8 percentage points. In part, the decline of racial differences in national turnout resulted from growing participation among southern blacks. The 1986 survey showed that regional differences among blacks had declined and showed that racial differences in turnout were negligible in the South.

The data used in our analyses were made available by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, which bears no responsibility for our analyses or interpretations. We are grateful to Santa Traugott for her advice about the 1988 vote validation study. Brian D. Silver and Kenneth C. Williams provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this note.

¹The Current Population Survey results reported in this and the following paragraph are based upon tables published in U.S. Bureau of the Census (1986) and U.S. Bureau of the Census (1989).

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Southern whites were only 1.0 percentage point more likely to report voting than southern blacks.² The 1986 election produced another positive sign for Americans who hoped to see racial differences eliminated. According to the Current Population Survey, young blacks were more likely to vote than young whites.

The 1988 election, however, reversed the trend toward declining racial differences. National turnout declined dramatically with only 50.1% of the adult population voting³ and with turnout among the politically eligible population falling to 51.8%,⁴ declines of 3 percentage points from 1984 on both measures. Declining turnout was registered in the Current Population Surveys, with reported turnout dropping 2.5 percentage points between 1984 and 1988. Reported turnout fell more among blacks than among whites. Among whites, reported turnout was 59.1%; among blacks it was 51.5%, a gap of 7.6 points. In addition, regional differences among blacks increased because turnout fell more among southern blacks than it did among blacks outside the South. Outside the South, reported turnout was 4.8% higher among whites than among blacks; in the South, reported turnout among whites was 8.4% higher than turnout among blacks. Moreover, although reported turnout was very low among the young, it was slightly higher among young whites than among young blacks.

Given the very large size of the Current Population Surveys, for most purposes they provide a more reliable guide for studying turnout than the National Election Studies. The 1988 Census survey, for example, is based upon interviews in 54,132 households and provides information about 110,452 individuals.⁵ However, the Census surveys rely upon the respondents' reports about turnout, and, as is well known, a substantial percentage of nonvoters claim to have voted. Moreover, vote validation studies in which local registration and voting records are used to determine whether or not respondents voted strongly suggest that blacks are more likely falsely to report voting than whites. Our analyses of the validation studies conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan (Abramson and Claggett 1984, 1986, 1989) demonstrate that relying upon reported turnout can lead to misleading conclusions about racial differences in electoral participation. Conventional wisdom suggested that blacks were less likely to vote than whites, but that these differences re-

²In addition to the 11 states of the old Confederacy, the Census Bureau includes Delaware, the District of Columbia, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, and West Virginia as southern.

³For official estimates of turnout between 1930 and 1988, see U.S. Bureau of the Census (1990).

⁴Based upon a personal communication from Walter Dean Burnham, June 8, 1989. For Burnham's estimates of turnout for all presidential and midterm elections between 1789 and 1986, see Burnham 1987.

⁵Information on the size of the 1988 Current Population Survey was provided to us directly by Jerry T. Jennings, the Census Bureau official with the primary responsibility for preparing the Census Bureau reports on electoral participation.

sulted solely from their lower socioeconomic status and because they are more likely than whites to live in the South. Our analyses of the vote validation studies demonstrated that this conclusion was wrong. Controls for level of education and region usually eliminated or even reversed racial differences in reported electoral participation. But when participation was measured by the vote validation studies, racial differences persisted even after controls were introduced.

Even though there is now considerable evidence that racial differences in turnout do not result solely from differences in socioeconomic status and because blacks are more likely to live in the South, this view is still found even in the most recent research literature. This conclusion, for example, is advanced in the National Research Council study on the status of blacks (Jaynes and Williams 1989, 234), even though the authors recognize that “Black nonvoters are consistently more likely to report voting than are white nonvoters.” “It is not yet clear,” they add, “whether this remains true after controlling for demographic characteristics, but the possibility should be kept in mind when considering the data reported.” But despite this warning, the study analyzes reported turnout and concludes that black turnout is higher than white turnout once controls for demographic characteristics and state-level political characteristics are introduced. Thus, it is important to reiterate the basic finding of our previous research, and to demonstrate that our conclusions are supported with the most recent available data.

This note analyzes the 1988 NES vote validation study to answer two basic questions. Did racial differences in turnout increase when turnout is measured by actual checks of voting and registration records? Secondly, do racial differences in electoral participation persist in 1988 when controls are introduced for racial differences in region and socioeconomic status? Lastly, we will speculate about the reasons black turnout declined in 1988.

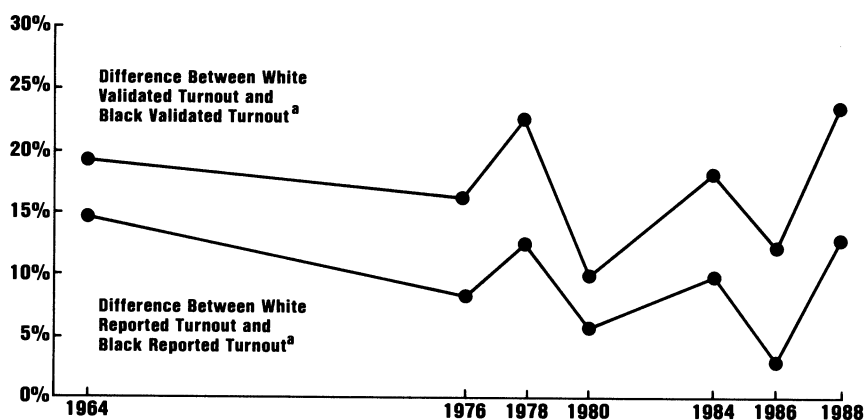
To answer the first question we report racial differences in both reported and validated turnout in all six previous NES surveys in which vote validation studies were conducted, as well as the results for 1988 (see figure 1).⁶ As the figure makes clear, racial differences in both reported and validated turnout were greater in 1988 than they were in 1984. In 1984, whites were 9.9 percentage points more likely to report voting than blacks; in 1988, these differences increased to 12.8 percentage points. In 1988, as with all previous vote validation studies, blacks appear to be more likely to overreport voting than whites,⁷ and, as a result, racial differences in turnout are greater when

⁶In analyzing the 1988 vote validation study, we used the summary measure of whether or not the respondent voted, restricting our analysis to respondents included in the postelection interview (Variable 1147). Respondents coded 11 were classified as voters, those coded 21, 22, 24, 31, and 32 were classified as nonvoters, and all other cases were classified as not ascertained.

⁷Among whites who said they voted ($N = 1,041$), 12.3% did not vote according to the vote validation study; among blacks who said they voted ($N = 125$), 33.6% did not vote, a difference that is clearly significant ($p < .001$). Moreover, nearly significant ($p < .06$) racial differences

FIGURE 1

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE VALIDATION STUDIES: 1964, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1986, AND 1988



Source: Surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: For details about the 1964, 1976, 1978, and 1980 results, see Abramson and Claggett (1984); for details about the 1984 results, see Abramson and Claggett (1986) and Abramson and Claggett (1989); for details about the 1986 results, see Abramson and Claggett (1989); and for details about the 1988 results, see note 6 of this research note.

^aWhite turnout minus black turnout.

turnout is measured by the vote validation data.⁸ The 1988 vote validation study suggests that whites were 23.7 percentage points more likely to vote than blacks, somewhat greater than the 18.2 point difference in 1984.

The wave-like pattern of change reflected in figure 1 probably captures a combination of real-world change and the changing procedures used in the vote validation studies. If one ignores the jump in racial differences in the 1978 midterm contest, racial differences in both reported and validated turnout declined through 1980. Racial differences in reported turnout rose some-

are found among the "population at risk" of falsely claiming to vote (see Anderson and Silver 1986; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986). Among whites who were classified as validated nonvoters ($N = 524$), 24.4% said that they voted; among black validated nonvoters ($N = 126$), 33.3% claimed to have voted.

⁸We have always considered the possibility that the tendency of blacks to overreport voting more than whites might be a methodological artifact resulting from relatively poor record keeping in areas where blacks live. The 1986 and 1988 NES surveys include studies of election administration units, and these studies provide both objective and subjective measures of record-keeping quality. Our analyses of these studies suggest that the tendency of blacks more often falsely to report voting than whites is not a result of differential record-keeping quality (see Abramson and Claggett 1990; also, Traugott 1989).

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE WHO SAID THEY VOTED AND PERCENTAGE WHO VOTED ACCORDING TO VOTE VALIDATION STUDY, BY RACE,
REGION, AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION: 1988

Method of Measurement	Race	South					Total for South	
		8 Grades or Less	Some High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate		
Respondents' Report	White	50 (50)	33 (39)	58 (96)	82 (56)	95 (64)	65.9 (305)	
		29 (21)	36 (22)	47 (38)	55 (22)	91 (11)	47.4 (114)	
	Black	44 (50)	26 (39)	44 (89)	63 (52)	79 (57)	51.9 (287)	
		19 (21)	15 (20)	30 (37)	32 (22)	70 (10)	29.1 (110)	
Outside the South								
Method of Measurement	Race	8 Grades or Less	Some High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Total for Outside the South	Total for Nation
	White	54 (87)	57 (110)	67 (422)	79 (280)	92 (266)	73.6 (1,165)	72.0 (1,470)
		80 (5)	71 (17)	55 (33)	83 (30)	100 (12)	73.2 (97)	59.2 (211)
Vote Validation Study	White	49 (85)	53 (106)	60 (407)	71 (269)	83 (262)	66.4 (1,129)	63.5 (1,416)
		60 (5)	47 (17)	38 (32)	57 (30)	82 (11)	51.6 (95)	39.5 (205)

Source: Survey conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.
Note: Numbers in parentheses are the totals upon which percentages are based.

what between 1980 and 1984, but racial differences in validated turnout increased more. But the increase in racial differences in validated turnout may be partly the result of changes in the procedures used to measure electoral participation. Between 1980 and 1984 the vote validation procedures were improved (see Traugott 1989). Beginning in 1984, the SRC no longer attempted to validate the records of respondents who said they did not vote and who said they were not registered. Greater efforts were made to learn about the record-keeping procedures used by the local registration and voting offices. These improved procedures may have contributed to increased racial differences in validated turnout. In the 1986 midterm contest, racial differences in reported turnout reached their lowest level, but racial differences in validated turnout were higher than those in 1980. And in 1988, racial differences in both reported and validated turnout rose sharply.

To determine whether regional and socioeconomic differences can account for racial differences in turnout, we begin by presenting the percentage of white and black reported and validated voters in 1988 controlling for region and level of education (see table 1).⁹ Although many of the basic patterns are the same as in previous years, the 1988 results reveal changes as well. As in past surveys, white southerners are less likely to vote than whites outside the South, and black southerners are less likely to vote than blacks outside this region. However, as with the Current Population Surveys, regional differences among blacks increased. Both measures of turnout show that racial differences in the South are substantially greater than racial differences outside the South. Among whites in both regions there is a clear positive relationship between level of education and turnout, regardless of which measure of participation is employed. Among southern blacks there is also a clear positive relationship between level of education and both measures of electoral participation. Outside the South, blacks with higher levels of education are more likely to vote than those with lower levels of formal education, although these differences are relatively small. These results differ in a basic respect from the 1986 results, which showed relatively high levels of participation among blacks who had not graduated from high school.¹⁰

As with our previous analyses, we employed two different methods to determine the extent to which racial differences in turnout persist when controls are introduced for region and level of education.¹¹ Table 2 reports the results

⁹Table 1 updates tables 1 and 2 of Abramson and Claggett 1984, and table 1 of Abramson and Claggett 1986 and of Abramson and Claggett 1989. As in our previous analyses, our definition of the South includes only the states of the old Confederacy. We exclude Tennessee because the NES surveys sample Tennessee to represent the Border states.

¹⁰This relationship was also reported by the 1986 Current Population Survey. However, the 1988 Current Population Survey found that blacks with low levels of formal education had low levels of turnout.

¹¹We employed two procedures mainly because of the controversial nature of studies that involve race. The algebraic standardization procedure has a major advantage. It is very simple to

TABLE 2

**ACTUAL AND STANDARDIZED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK
TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE
VALIDATION STUDY: 1988**

Method of Measurement	Equation Number	Controls Introduced for Following Variables	White Turnout	Black Turnout	Difference between White Turnout and Black Turnout ^a	Percentage of Racial Differences Accounted for by Stan- dardization Procedures
Respondents' Reports	(1)	None	72.0	59.2	12.8	—
	(2)	Region		67.8	4.2	67
	(3)	Level of Education		64.4	7.6	41
	(4)	Region and Level of Education		70.8	1.2	91
Vote Validation Study	(1)	None	63.5	39.5	24.0	—
	(2)	Region		47.0	16.5	31
	(3)	Level of Education		44.9	18.6	22
	(4)	Region and Level of Education		51.0	12.5	48

Source: Survey conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: For the numbers upon which these estimates are based, see table 1.

^aWhite turnout minus black turnout.

of our algebraic standardization procedures,¹² whereas table 3 presents the results when categorical regression procedures are used.¹³

Our algebraic standardization procedures reveal that controls for region

compute, and scholars who questioned our conclusions could easily employ these algebraic procedures to test our results. However, the algebraic standardization procedures do not allow us to determine whether racial differences are statistically significant once controls are introduced. Therefore, we applied a second procedure that provided for such a test, recognizing the need to use a technique that was suitable for analyzing a dichotomous dependent variable. A variety of procedures, such as logit-regression or probit would be appropriate, but we decided to utilize categorical regression because the results are easily interpretable.

¹²Table 2 updates the results of tables 3 and 4 of Abramson and Claggett (1984) and table 2 of Abramson and Claggett (1986) and of Abramson and Claggett (1989).

¹³Table 3 updates the results of tables 5 and 6 of Abramson and Claggett (1984) and table 3 of Abramson and Claggett (1986) and of Abramson and Claggett (1989).

TABLE 3

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK TURNOUT AS MEASURED BY RESPONDENTS' REPORTS AND BY THE VOTE VALIDATION STUDY AS ESTIMATED BY CATEGORICAL REGRESSION EQUATIONS (ZERO-ORDER DIFFERENCES AND DIFFERENCES WITH CONTROLS): 1988

Method of Measurement	Equation Number	Controls Introduced for Following Variables	Difference between White Turnout and Black Turnout ^a	Percentage of Racial Differences Accounted for by Controls
Respondents' Reports	(1)	None	12.9**	—
	(2)	Region	8.4*	35
	(3)	Level of Education	6.1*	53
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	3.9	70
Vote Validation Study	(1)	None	24.0**	—
	(2)	Region	18.9**	21
	(3)	Level of Education	19.5**	19
	(4)	Region and Level of Education	15.8**	34

Source: Survey conducted by the Survey Research Center and the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan.

Note: Variables coded as follows: Race, -1 = black, 1 = white; Region, -1 = outside the South, 1 = South. Level of Education was treated as a series of four dummy variables with each of the four lower levels of education compared with college graduates. For the numbers upon which these estimates are based, see table 1.

^aWhite turnout minus black turnout. This difference is derived by doubling the size of the estimated regression coefficient since with our dummy variable procedures this coefficient is equal to half the distance between white and black turnout.

*Significant at .05 (based on χ^2 s).

**Significant at .01 (based on χ^2 s).

eliminate two-thirds of the racial differences in reported turnout, with region thus having a greater impact in reducing zero-order racial differences than in any survey since 1964. Controls for level of education reduce two-fifths of the difference, while combined controls for region and level of education eliminate nine-tenths of the zero-order difference in reported electoral participation.

Substantially different results are obtained when turnout is measured by checks of local registration and voting records. Controls for region reduce

the zero-order difference in validated turnout by one-third, with regional controls accounting for more of the zero-order difference in turnout than in any survey since 1964. Controls for level of education reduce racial differences by one-fifth, and combined controls eliminate nearly half the original racial difference. But whites are still 12 percentage points more likely to vote than blacks even when joint controls for region and level of education are introduced. Although these results are consistent with our previous findings, the increased impact of regional controls marks an important change, especially in light of the trend toward declining regional differences since the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The greater impact of region results from the decline in turnout among southern blacks.

Similar results obtain when controls are introduced using categorical regression equations, although the impact of region is not as great when this procedure is employed. Even so, controls for region eliminate more than one-third of the racial differences in reported turnout and thus have a greater impact than in the 1980 and 1984 elections. Controls for level of education eliminate more than half the difference in reported turnout. Most importantly, combined controls for region and level of education eliminate 70% of the racial difference in reported turnout, and the tendency of whites to vote more than blacks is no longer significant.

When turnout is measured by actual checks of the voting and registration records substantially different results are obtained. Controls for region eliminate one-fifth of the racial difference in validated turnout, thus having a greater impact than in 1980 and about the same impact as in 1984. Controls for level of education also eliminate one-fifth of the difference. Combined controls for region and level of education eliminate one-third of the racial difference in validated turnout, but blacks remain nearly 16 percentage points less likely to vote than whites and racial differences are clearly significant.¹⁴

The 1988 results provide a textbook example of the effects of employing alternative measures of electoral participation. When reported participation is used to measure turnout the conventional wisdom that low black turnout results from their low socioeconomic status and their tendency to live in the South is supported. When turnout is measured by actual checks of voting and registration records, racial differences remain even after controls are introduced. Failure to recognize that reported turnout underestimates racial differences may lead to misleading conclusions, as the recent National Research Council study of blacks demonstrates.

¹⁴ Young blacks were significantly less likely to vote than young whites when turnout was measured by the vote validation studies. We examined age differences to determine the extent to which the tendency of blacks to vote less often than whites resulted from the fact that blacks tend to be younger than whites. According to our estimates, controlling for the relative youth of blacks accounts for only 7% of the racial differences in reported turnout and only 4% of the racial difference in validated turnout.

Explaining the reasons for the decline of black turnout in 1988 is an important research problem. Of course, the decline of black turnout was part of an overall decline among the entire electorate, and explaining this overall decline is a difficult research task (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1990). Explaining why black turnout fell more than white turnout is an even more difficult task (see Kinder et al. 1989), and providing an explanation goes well beyond the scope of this note. One possibility is that the very low turnout among blacks resulted from their short-term disappointment with the failure of Jesse Jackson to be on the Democratic ticket and the general failure of the Dukakis campaign to mobilize blacks. Young blacks, who are more supportive of Jackson than their elders (see Preston 1989), may have been especially disaffected.

Uhlaner's (1989) analysis suggests disaffection among Jackson supporters may have contributed to low black turnout. Using the 1988 NES survey she demonstrates that among blacks positive feelings toward Jackson (as measured by the "feelings thermometer") contributed to reported registration, but that among registered blacks feelings toward Jackson were not related to reported turnout in the general election. However, Kinder and his colleagues (1989) conclude that disaffection with Dukakis did not directly contribute to the decline of black turnout. Analyzing reported turnout with the NES survey, they note that affect toward both Dukakis and Jackson was unrelated to voting in the general election. They attribute the decline in turnout to a decline in the impact of group interest. In 1984, blacks who identified closely with blacks were more likely to vote, but in 1988 black identification had no impact on black turnout. But Kinder and his colleagues do not explain why the impact of group interest upon turnout declined, although they argue that it may result from Dukakis's treatment of Jackson.

It is also important to explain why turnout fell among southern blacks, especially given the long-term decline in regional differences. The very low level of regional differences in 1986 may have resulted from the large number of close Senate races in the South, especially since blacks were seen as crucial (and proved to be crucial) in races in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and North Carolina (see Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 1987). In 1988, there was less effort to mobilize southern blacks. It is also possible that southern blacks, who played such a major role in Jackson's Super Tuesday successes, were particularly disaffected, especially toward the end of the campaign when Dukakis wrote off the South as a lost cause.

Future research should utilize the 1988 NES vote validation study to account for the decline of black turnout, although, given the relatively small number of blacks sampled, it may be important to use alternative sources, including official election statistics and the Census Bureau surveys. Although the Current Population Surveys do not check actual voting and do not measure political attitudes, they may be useful for contextual analyses (see Ken-

drick 1989). But while further analysis is needed to explain why black turnout declined in 1988, this note clearly demonstrates that when turnout is measured by actual checks of voting and registration records, blacks are substantially less likely to vote than comparably situated whites. This note also suggests that analysts who rely upon measures of reported electoral participation should be sensitive to the possibility that their measures exaggerate relative levels of black turnout.

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